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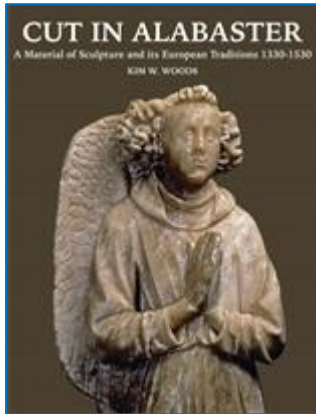
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PEREGRINATIONS

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BOOK REVIEW: Kim Woods, *Cut in Alabaster. A Material of Sculpture and its European Traditions, 1350–1550, Distinguished Contributions to the Study of the Arts in the Burgundian Netherlands*, 3 (Turnhout: Brepols/Harvey Miller, 2018), 418 pp, 5 b/w and 194 color illustrations, €150 (hb.), ISBN: 978-1-909400-26-9.

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‘Why should a man, whose blood is warm within, / Sit like his grandsire cut in alabaster?’ (*The Merchant of Venice*, I, i, 83–84). Gratiano’s exhortation to his melancholic friend Antonio illustrates the proverbial quality of alabaster – a form of gypsum – as a material used for ancestral tomb monuments, albeit usually recumbent ones in the medieval and early modern period (Fig. 1), and there are many of these to be found across Europe. Tombs are indeed a prominent feature in Kim Woods’ new monograph *Cut in Alabaster* on the uses of this translucent material in the period 1350 to 1550, which is a welcome – and impressive – addition to the literature on medieval sculpture and on alabaster in particular. Yet the scope of this book is much wider, both thematically and geographically.

With the increased interest in materiality, it is perhaps not surprising that many studies have recently been devoted to the subject of medieval alabaster, in particular an article by Rachel Dressler in *Peregrinations* and another by Sally Badham in the journal *Church Monuments*,¹ but also several new books,² while another study has just been published.³ This must have made it very frustrating for the author, as Woods explains in her Introduction (p. 4), that after completing her book in 2014–15 it took until late 2018 for it to be published. She was able to add only the odd reference to these new publications at this late stage and by then some really were no longer

quite so new: thus Rona Kasl's 2014 monograph is still referred to by its provisional title *Hispano-Flemish Art and the Miraflores Tombs (Me Fecit)* in the Introduction (p. 4), yet by its correct title in the Bibliography.⁴ Even so, this richly illustrated study is a mine of information that offers an unusually wide scope as well as many new insights, especially on Iberian material that is all too often inaccessible because of linguistic barriers – Woods learnt Spanish especially for this study.

Cut in Alabaster is divided into nine chapters, three of which take a thematic approach to materiality, *viz.* chapter 1 on alabaster as a material of sculpture, chapter 2 on makers, markets and methods, and chapter 4 on the status and significance of alabaster. The remaining six chapters discuss types of artefact (6, 8 and 9), *viz.* tombs, altarpieces and other objects for public and private use, and also specific case studies (chapters 3, 5 and 7). Each chapter ends with a short overall conclusion. Most chapters can actually be read as independent essays, albeit with cross-references and occasionally some repetition or even the odd non sequitur and inconsistency, such as the description of a rosary in the hands of the effigy of Aldonza de Mendoza (d. 1435) in Guadalajara (p. 247) whereas a devotional book is mentioned instead on p. 271. (Fig. 12 on p. 246 shows just the head, making it impossible to verify whether Aldonza's effigy is holding a rosary or a book, or indeed both.) Errors are few, although fig. 3 on p. 148 shows the effigy of Jacoba van Glymes and not that of her husband, as stated on p. 147. I must also query the 'cooking pot with a pestle' in the Nativity scene in Pere Oller's alabaster altarpiece in Vic Cathedral (p. 308) – surely a pot and spoon would be more logical, which is also what we see in the Netherlandish Nativity panel painting of *c.* 1400 in Museum Mayer van den Bergh, Antwerp – and the confusing reference to 'Philip the Handsome of the Netherlands' (p. 126) for Philip I of Castile, who succeeded his mother Mary as Duke of Burgundy. The overall quality of production is high and the illustrations are mostly excellent, even if some are disappointing, either because of colour distortion (*e.g.* chap. 6, figs 8–10) or because of an awkward angle (*e.g.* the photo of Sir Richard Pembridge's tomb in Hereford Cathedral, chap. 6, fig. 5). (compare instead **Fig. 1**)



Figure 1 Alabaster tomb effigy of Sir Richard de Pembridge II (d. 1375), Hereford Cathedral. Photo: Tim Sutton.

Although Woods includes many artefacts produced in France and the Burgundian Netherlands, her focus is especially on Spain and England where alabaster was found in large quantities, particularly on the river Ebro in northern Spain, in Chellaston (Derbyshire) and near Tutbury (Staffordshire). These quarries yielded sufficiently large blocks that enabled the creation of life-size tomb effigies from one single block or slab of alabaster, as Woods explains in chapter 1. Thus the contract drawn up in 1419 between Katherine Greene and the carvers Thomas Prentys and Robert Sutton of Chellaston for the surviving double tomb of Katherine and her late husband Ralph Greene in Lowick (Northamptonshire), which Woods briefly discusses and illustrates (chap. 1, fig. 2), stipulates ‘vne tombe de pierre appallee Alabastre bon fyn & pure contenant en longure ix pees dassise & en la[rg]eur iiij pees & deux dassise’ (a tomb of stone called alabaster, good, fine, and pure, containing in length nine feet and in breadth four feet two inches) with ‘deux ymages dalabastre [...] contenant en longure vij pees dassise’ (two images of alabaster, [...] containing in length seven feet).⁵ Almost a century earlier alabaster had been chosen, most likely by the young king Edward III himself, for the tomb of his late father Edward II (d. 1327) in Gloucester Cathedral. Edward III’s wife

Philippa of Hainaut (d. 1369) was also memorialised in what is now confirmed to be alabaster at Westminster Abbey, London, although she was herself responsible for commissioning her own monument from Jean de Liège, for which the Flemish-born sculptor was paid 200 marks or £133 6s. 8d. in 1366. An earlier payment of around 100 marks suggests that the monument was made in Paris ('super factura tumbe regina apud Paris'), although the alabaster may have been acquired from Tutbury and then transported to Paris via London, thereby increasing the price significantly because of the additional transport costs (chap. 2, pp. 52–52).

Alabaster was also found in other parts of Europe, but the local quality and quantity differed widely, so that the search for large-size blocks of high-quality (*i.e.* pure white) alabaster for prestigious projects could be difficult. Consequently larger sculptures were sometimes made from separate smaller blocks that were joined together, as in the case of a *Pietà* of c. 1430–40 by a sculptor from the circle of the Master of Rimini, now in the Louvre in Paris (chap. 1, figs 7–8), but also – somewhat surprisingly – in the case of the royal tomb effigies of Charles III 'the Noble' of Navarre (d. 1425) and his wife Eleanor of Castile (d. 1416) in Pamplona Cathedral, the alabaster for which was acquired mainly from the Sástago quarries near Zaragoza (chap. 5, pp. 193–202). Unpainted alabaster – as well as marble – was also sometimes used for the separately carved faces and hands on tomb monuments, such as on the effigy in Avesnes stone of Jacoba van Glymes (d. 1452/62) at Beersel church in Belgium, albeit that the adjacent effigy identified as that of her husband Hendrik II van Witthem (d. 1454) is made solely of alabaster (chap. 4, p. 147 and figs 2–3). *Cut in Alabaster* abounds in such fascinating examples, discoveries and occasionally hypotheses, such as Woods' proposed location of the Rimini workshop in Bruges (chap. 3).

Apart from its availability, alabaster has many qualities that made it an appealing choice for patrons and sculptors alike. While it is easy to carve when freshly quarried, exposure to the air hardens the material and allows it to be polished like marble. Its translucency and lustre, but especially its skin tone and

texture, also add a great sense of naturalism to alabaster sculptures, so that only minimal colour needed to be applied by medieval artists, such as red for the lips, gold for the hair, and colour for the eyes, dress and heraldry. Overall polychromy would defeat the purpose of using alabaster, yet colour could be applied more lavishly, as on the tomb effigy of the wealthy Bishop of Winchester and Chancellor of England, William of Wykeham (d. 1404), at Winchester Cathedral. Curiously contrasting with the richly polychromed mitre and church vestments, which is undoubtedly a later repainting but in line with the figure's original polychrome appearance, the alabaster face now looks blank and dead, and may even have been stripped and re-polished; however, it becomes startlingly alive when one imagines the lips and open eyes polychromed (**Fig. 2**). The above-mentioned contract for the



Figure 2 Detail of the alabaster tomb effigy of bishop William of Wykeham (d. 1404), Winchester Cathedral. Photo: Dr John Crook.

alabaster tomb of Ralph Greene and his wife Katherine likewise stipulates that 'Lesqueux tombe ymage & arche serront proporcionnez endorres pietes & arraies oue colours bien & sufficeantment en le pluis honest & profitable manere come appartient a tiel oueraigne' (the which tomb, image and arch shall be proportioned, gilded, painted, and arrayed with colours well and sufficiently in the most honest and profitable manner that pertains to such a work). However, in their present state the effigies no longer show polychromy but just bare alabaster. Woods also illustrates cases in which the application of paint has made it very difficult to establish at first sight whether a carving is made of alabaster, such as a fifteenth-century Madonna in Bruges with later polychromy (chap. 1, fig. 9) or the statue of Charlemagne of the 1340s(?) in Girona Cathedral Museum (chap. 9, fig. 2). Another problem is the difficulty of distinguishing alabaster and marble, as in the case of a thirteenth-century polychrome 'White Virgin' in Toledo Cathedral (chap. 4, fig. 9).⁶ It does not help that the term 'marble' was used in northern Europe to refer to types of dark limestone that could be polished to a high degree, such as Purbeck, Tournai and Dinant 'marble'. The Dominican scholar Albertus Magnus (d. 1280) grouped alabaster among marbles in his *Book of Minerals* (chap. 4, p. 146). Indeed, the almost pure white of northern European alabaster makes it look very much like marble, so that Albrecht Dürer may be forgiven for describing Michelangelo's marble *Madonna and Child* in the church of Our Lady in Bruges as 'alabaster' (chap. 1, p. 7). The sculptor Jean Pépin de Huy was described as an 'entailleux d'albastre', but he worked in both marble and alabaster. The formidable countess Mahaut of Artois (d.



Figure 3 The tomb of Marc Antony and Cleopatra, miniature by the Boucicaut Master (detail) in *Les cas des nobles hommes et femmes*, Paris (France), 1413–15, Photo: The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, Ms. 63 (96.MR.17), fol. 209r.

1329) commissioned from him

the two monuments to her

husband Othon of Burgundy

(1303), formerly in the abbey

of Cherlieu, and their son

Robert of Artois (d. 1317), now

in the royal abbey of Saint-

Denis. Documents describe

Othon's tomb as made of

alabaster, but a pleurant

identified as belonging to this

monument is actually made of

marble and that was most likely also used for the lost effigy itself as it was for

Robert's surviving effigy (chap 2, pp. 50-51). Woods could have added to this series

Jean Pépin's small marble effigy of the couple's infant son Jean, originally at Poligny

and now in the museum of Besançon, for which an initial payment of 24 *livres* was

recorded in July 1315 with a further 20 *sols* to Jean de Rouen ‘pour poindre ladite tombe’.⁷ The French royal family, who had previously championed the use of gilt copper-alloy effigies in the mid thirteenth century, introduced what was to become a standard design of barely polychromed white marble or alabaster effigies on a contrasting black marble slab (chap. 4, p. 165–166). A miniature by the Boucicaut Master of the joint tomb of Marc Antony and Cleopatra in a manuscript of *Les cas des nobles hommes et femmes* of 1413–15 shows the impact of this dramatic use of contrasting white and black with minimal polychromy for tomb monuments (Fig. 3). Albertus Magnus’ claim that alabaster preserves corpses may also have contributed to its frequent use for tombs.⁸

However, alabaster was also widely used to produce smaller sculptures and reliefs that could be incorporated into larger retables, such as the Swansea Altarpiece of c. 1460–90 in the Victoria & Albert Museum, London, comprising five scenes of the Joys of the Virgin and two figures of St John the Baptist and St John the Evangelist set in a polychromed wooden framework.⁹ Such small-scale statues and panels could also be easily transported for assembly *in situ* into a larger altarpiece. In particular, English alabaster panels with their use of stock patterns and repetitive character are often regarded as commercial products, being both ubiquitous and not particularly valuable, although Woods rightly points out that their quality is arguably not inferior to that of many panel paintings of the period (chap. 4, p. 145). English alabaster relief panels occur throughout Europe, either surviving in isolation or sometimes still as part of composite altarpieces. An unusual case (not mentioned by

Woods) is the baroque altarpiece comprising seven fifteenth-century English panels with scenes of the Passion of Christ in the church of Sts Cosmas and St Damian in Afferden (Limburg, Netherlands – **Fig. 4a**). The seven panels are now displayed not horizontally, but in three layers with the Crucifixion at the top, albeit the latter has lost its canopy (**Fig. 4b**): it would originally have been taller than the other six panels and placed in the centre, flanked by three scenes on either side. It is not known how or when the panels ended up in Afferden. The painted arms on the predella are those of the local patrons responsible for the baroque retable that now houses the panels: Diederick Baron Schenck van Nydeggen (d. 1661) and his wife Anna Margaretha van Nassau (d. 1676). However, the original donor of the alabaster panels themselves may be the bearded male figure with a rosary kneeling in the bottom right corner of the Entombment panel (**Fig. 4c**).

There are thus so many angles to this monumental study on medieval alabaster, a material that lent itself to so many different forms of sculpture across Europe – and so many levels of quality and sophistication, from the often crude Head of St John the Baptist panels of English manufacture (esp. chap. 9, pp. 347–354)¹⁰ to the refined quality of the strikingly naturalistic Head of St John the Baptist by an unknown Netherlandish master of almost the same period (Fig. 5). While its availability and ease of carving made it highly suitable for mass production, its lustre and intrinsic beauty lent it almost iconic status. Woods makes reference to the Knight's Tale in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, which features a gate of white marble and an oratory niche of white alabaster (p. 11), and also to a printed 1486 edition of John Mirk's



Figure 4 A) Baroque retable (17th century) with seven English medieval alabaster relief panels Netherlands. Photo: Monique van der Steen, Dutch Cultural Heritage Agency (RCE), 2019. B) Crucifixion panel, English, 15th century, from the retable in the church of St Cosmas and St Damian, Afferden (Limburg, Netherlands). Photo: slide collection Huub Kurvers, Dutch Cultural Heritage Agency (RCE), 1963. C) Entombment panel, English, 15th century, from the retable in the church of St Cosmas and St Damian, Afferden (Limburg, Netherlands). Photo: Monique van der Steen, Dutch Cultural Heritage Agency (RCE), 2019.

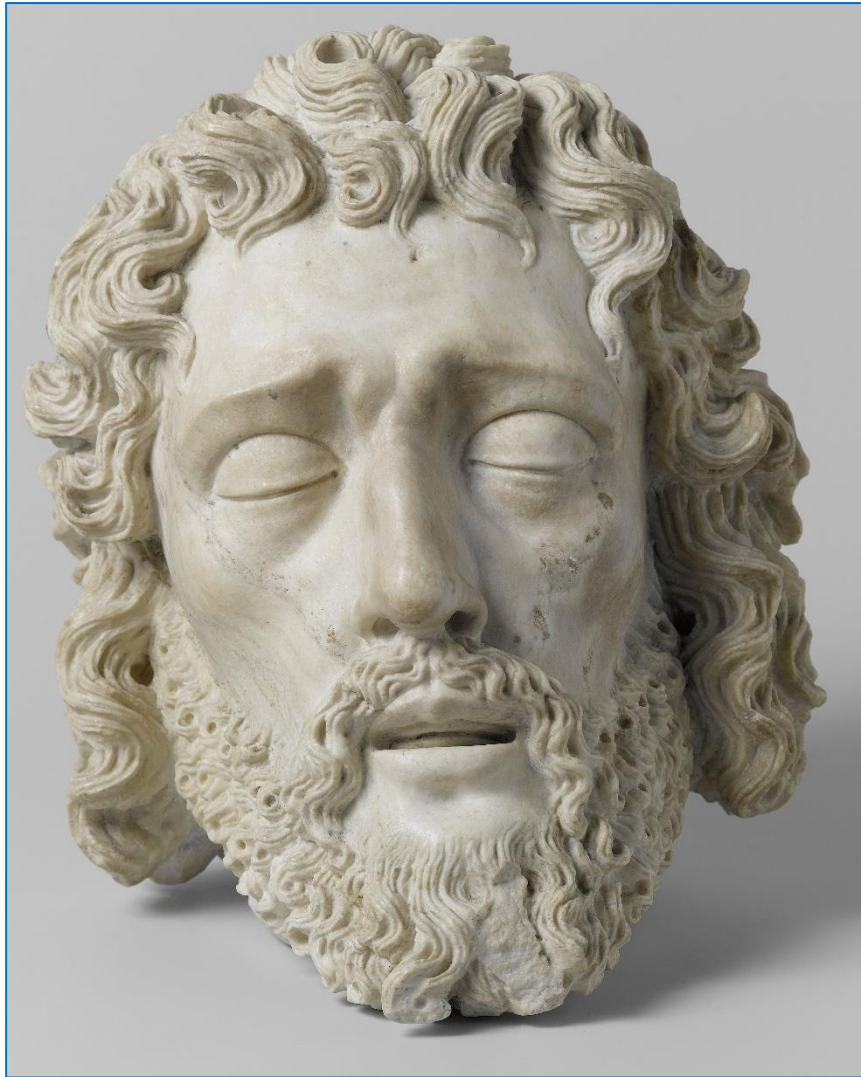


Figure 5 Alabaster head of St John the Baptist, Southern Netherlands, c. 1500, 26.7 cm high, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. Photo: <http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.351494>

showing the Passion of Christ, 15th century, church of Sts Cosmas and Damian, Afferden, Limburg, *Liber Festivalis* or *Festial* of c.1400 (p. 218), in which St Catherine's apocryphal last resting place on Mount Sinai is said to be 'a fayre tombe of alabaster'. Shakespeare was likewise aware of the proverbial qualities of alabaster when he had Othello consider ways of killing poor Desdemona:

Yet I'll not shed her blood,
Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow,
And smooth as monumental alabaster.
(*Othello*, V, ii)

His words underline the contrast between her white complexion and his own dark skin, but it also reads as if Othello is already contemplating his doomed wife's tomb monument as she lies nearby, innocent and asleep. 🐼

¹ Rachel Dressler, 'Identity, Status and Material: Medieval Alabaster Effigies in England', *Peregrinations: Journal of Medieval Art and Architecture*, 5: 2 (2015), pp. 65–96; Sally Badham, 'The Rise to Popularity of Alabaster for Memorialisation in England', *Church Monuments*, 31 (2016), pp. 11–67.

² Aleksandra Lipińska, *Moving Sculptures: Southern Netherlandish Alabasters from the 16th to 17th centuries in Central and Northern Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2015); Raymond H. State, *The Alabaster Carvers* (Ely: Melrose Books, 2017); Michael Statham, *Penarth Alabaster* (Cardiff: Welsh Stone Forum, 2017).

³ Zuleika Marat (ed.), *English Alabaster Carvings and their Cultural Contexts* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2019), which includes essays by Kim Woods, Jennifer Alexander, Jon Bayliss, Nigel Ramsay and others.

⁴ Rona Kasl, *The Making of Hispano-Flemish Style: Art, Commerce and Politics in Fifteenth-Century Castile* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014).

⁵ Sally Badham and Sophie Oosterwijk, "'Cest Endenture Fait Parentre": English Tomb Contracts of the Long Fourteenth Century', in Sally Badham and Sophie Oosterwijk (eds), *Monumental Industry. The Production of Tomb Monuments in England and Wales in the Long Fourteenth Century* (Donington: Shaun Tyas, 2010), pp. 217–218.

⁶ White marbles and alabasters are therefore discussed together in chapters 3 and 4 in Nicholas Penny, *The Materials of Sculpture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993).

⁷ The little figure was converted into a standing statue of St Philibert and correctly identified only in 1985. See *L'enfant oublié. Le gisant de Jean de Bourgogne et le mécénat de Mahaut d'Artois en Franche-Comté au XIV^e siècle*, exhib. cat. (Musée des Beaux-Arts et d'Archéologie de Besançon, 1997), pp. 58, 78–79 and 16.

⁸ Badham, 'The Rise to Popularity of Alabaster', p. 60.

⁹ <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O70204/the-swansea-altarpiece-altarpiece-unknown/>. See also Francis Cheetham, *English Medieval Alabasters. With a catalogue of the collection in the Victoria and Albert Museum* (Oxford: Phaidon/Christie's Limited, 1984), esp. pp. 70–71.

¹⁰ Compare Cheetham, *English Medieval Alabasters*, cat. 243–256, and also the probably North-German example on p. 337.